

WHY DID KHRUSHCHEV DO IT?

De-Stalinization and the Manner of Stalin's Death

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A YEAR has passed since Khrushchev by his speech to the closed session of the 20th Congress of the Soviet Communist party hurled the image of Stalin from the lofty pedestal on which it had been raised by the organized worship of the world Communist movement. Today, efforts are being made to restore the somewhat battered statue to a position of honor, on a pedestal not quite as high as that which it formerly occupied, but still far exceeding the worth of the dead dictator as portrayed in the scathing indictment of Khrushchev's speech. In the meantime the disastrous effects for international Communism of the denunciation of Stalin have become fully apparent. It was impossible to hold up to execration and ridicule the man who for thirty years had been the leader of the world's orthodox Communists without discrediting the party which had sustained his leadership and calling in question the virtue of a political system which could produce such results. Not only were great numbers of the fellow-travelers and camp-followers of Communism shocked and alienated by the scandal, but the most zealous and devout of the adherents of the creed—those who for years had blindly followed every turn and twist of the party line because of their faith in an infallible leader—were suddenly and utterly let down. In the recent events in Eastern Europe nothing has been more striking than the spread of disaffection

in the ranks of the Communist parties themselves, and especially among the young, but this is not to be wondered at if it is borne in mind how their indoctrination had been undone by the reversal overnight of everything they had been previously taught about the history of their revolution.

The consequences which have in fact followed from the demolition of the Stalin myth have been so inevitable, and should have been so easy to foresee, that it becomes more than ever a problem to explain why it was done. There are three possible interpretations of the Khrushchev speech. One is that it was an act of reckless folly prompted by feelings of pent-up resentment against the dead dictator and carried through without any adequate consideration of its probable consequences. The second is that it was an act of calculated policy designed to overcome resistance in the name of Stalin to measures taken by his successors, and that though the price which should have to be paid for it may have been underestimated, there was a deliberate weighing of political profit and loss in the decision. The third hypothesis is that the move had nothing to do with any changes in Soviet domestic or foreign policy, but was forced on Stalin's heirs by a hidden factor arising out of the circumstances of his death. It is this last explanation which is the special theme of this article. But before considering it in detail the two alternative theories must be briefly examined.

The view that Khrushchev's speech was a virtually unpremeditated outburst in which he was carried away by his own oratory to work off all the grievances against his dead master that had for years been rankling in his breast, has in its favor the intensely bitter and vindictive tone of the speech, which

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certainly reads like that of an angry man. Khrushchev, moreover, has been known, on other occasions, particularly when under the influence of liquor, to talk publicly with an outrageous indiscretion which appears to be embarrassing to his colleagues. But a closer examination of the 20th Congress speech does not support the idea that it was just Khrushchev flying off the handle. The argument is developed in a most comprehensive and systematic way, giving evidence of careful planning, and Khrushchev definitely states that "the Central Committee of the party considers it absolutely necessary to make the material pertaining to this matter available" to the Congress. It is impossible to avoid the conclusion that the speech was the outcome of a decision taken by the collective top leadership of the party and that Khrushchev was not in any case in a position to make a move of such importance without the approval of his colleagues. If it was a collective decision, it cannot be assigned simply to the "ebullience" of Khrushchev and must be regarded as the deliberate policy of a group of men who were neither young nor inexperienced in politics, but had been for many years in or very near the highest seats of power in the Soviet Union. It is incredible that such a group should have reached such a decision on the spur of the moment or in a fit of pique.

WE ARE driven, therefore, to the second hypothesis, that it was a calculated act of policy, and at first sight this seems to imply that it was aimed at getting rid of the cult of Stalin as an obstacle to something that the new rulers were wanting to do. The speech, then, would be a necessary part of a process of "de-Stalinization." But if it is asked exactly how the Stalin myth was impeding Khrushchev and his colleagues at the beginning of last year, or how they gained a greater freedom of action by destroying it, it is extremely difficult to give an answer.

The Soviet Communist leaders had no intention of altering the system fundamentally; there had indeed been some con-

siderable changes since Stalin's death, notably in the curbing of the secret police, but these had been made long before the 20th Congress, and there is no evidence of any attempts to reverse them in Stalin's name which might have made an attack on his memory appear as a political necessity for a reforming leadership. Nor is it clear why it was so urgent to deal with "the practical consequences resulting from the cult of the individual"; if this cult was merely one of Stalin himself, it was directed at a man who had been dead for three years and could no longer intervene in political affairs, but if it meant a tendency to excessive submission to the foremost leader of the party, the perpetuation of the cult could only be to the benefit of Khrushchev himself. Moreover, if, as was certainly the case, the Stalin era had left many bitter memories among members of the Communist party as well as among the masses of the Russian people, Stalin's heirs had already found, and made full use of, a perfect scapegoat for that period in the person of the executed Beria. Whatever had been wrong in Russia since 1938 could be attributed to him, and on arrival in Belgrade to be reconciled with Tito, Khrushchev had represented the Soviet-Yugoslav break of 1948 as his work.

With Beria's corpse to bear the blame for whatever of undeniable evil there had been in the glorious years of Stalin's rule, there was no need for the new holders of power to impute any of it to Stalin himself; on the contrary, they had the greatest interest in preserving the cult, for they were his legitimate heirs, who had replaced him, by a "constitutional" succession, and not by any coup d'état or insurrection such as would have impelled them to disparage the regime they had supplanted. Had a group of underground Trotskyites or Bukharinites seized power after Stalin's death, they might have been expected to denounce him as the man who had betrayed and corrupted the revolutionary cause he had inherited from Lenin. But the men ruling Russia in February 1956—Khrushchev, Malenkov, Bulganin, Molotov—were men who for years had held the

highest offices of state under Stalin and had been closely associated with him in all his policies. If they pulled down his idol, they could hardly avoid damaging themselves, to say nothing of the risk of bringing fatal discredit on what had been for so many years in all Communist propaganda "the party of Lenin and Stalin."

SO WE are brought back to the question: why did they do it? If they had in their attack on Stalin no rational political motive which could outweigh the manifest risks and disadvantages of the course they took, it remains only to consider the possibility that they felt a need to protect themselves personally against a suspicion that they were responsible for their late master's death. If there were any such suspicion in Russia, it would be highly dangerous for the ruling clique in so far as Stalin was regarded as a great, good, and wise man whose removal by assassination would have been an unforgivable crime. It would, of course, be much less dangerous if the politically important sections of the Soviet population could be persuaded that he had in reality been a blundering, bloodthirsty, and capricious tyrant, almost a madman, who was ruining the state and whose premature elimination would have been a public service.

There is no direct evidence of a widespread belief in Russia that Stalin was murdered. But one would not expect such thoughts to be openly expressed in the levels of Soviet life to which foreign journalists have access. Citizens of a totalitarian state learn to keep their mouths shut; Beria may be dead but Serov is still there, and it is better not to speculate publicly about political affairs in ways that can still cause anyone to be sent to Arctic Siberia. In view of the circumstances of Stalin's death, however, it is hardly conceivable that there should not have been any such speculation, taking the form no doubt of mere hints and insinuations in private conversation among friends, but ultimately reaching the ears of the men of the Kremlin through secret-police reports. The objective ground for sus-

picion, whether for Russians or for foreigners, lay in the fact that Stalin died just at the moment when the world was awaiting the trial of a group of doctors alleged to have confessed to participation in a major conspiracy against him, and that within a month after his death his successors had declared the confessions to have been extorted and the conspiracy a fabrication. It would indeed have been extraordinary if in this context, after so many years of alleged plots and only too real executions, of public confessions of treason and exhortations to perpetual vigilance, it had not occurred to anyone in the Soviet Union that the timing of Stalin's death might have been more than a coincidence.

The discovery of the so-called Doctors' Plot was announced on January 13, 1953, and the official statement already indicated that the range of the prosecution would extend far beyond the doctors themselves. It was declared that

... the agencies of state security did not discover the doctors' wrecking terrorist organization in time. Yet these agencies should have been particularly vigilant, since history already records instances of foul murderers and traitors to the motherland in the guise of doctors, such as the doctors Levin and Pletnev, who killed the great Russian writer A. M. Gorky and the outstanding Soviet statesmen, V. V. Kuibyshev and V. R. Menshinsky by deliberately wrong treatment on orders from the enemies of the Soviet Union. . . . besides these enemies we still have one more enemy—the carelessness of our people. . . . to end sabotage it is necessary to put an end to carelessness in our ranks.

This was followed by talks of the need for cleansing the Communist party of "degenerates and two-facers"; no names were mentioned, but the hints of far-reaching conspiracy created an atmosphere heavy with fear of another great purge comparable to that of 1936-38. Against whom would it be directed? Those most obviously implicated in "carelessness" (which in Stalin's purge technique could so easily be turned into ill intent) were Beria and Abakumov, who (the latter as Minister of State Security) had been responsible for the "agencies of state security" at the time of the alleged murders

of Zhdanov and Shcherbakov by the doctors, and had failed to discover the plot "in time." But the charge of "carelessness" could reach out further and involve those who held responsible posts in the administration of the party. That others besides those directly concerned with control of the police felt themselves endangered at this time was made clear by Khrushchev in his speech to the 20th Congress. Speaking nearly three years after Stalin's death, he then declared:

Let us consider the first Central Committee plenum after the Nineteenth Party Congress, when Stalin characterized Vyacheslav Mikhailovich Molotov and Anastas Ivanovich Mikoyan and suggested that these old workers of our party were guilty of some baseless charges. It is not excluded that had Stalin remained at the helm for another several months, Comrades Molotov and Mikoyan would probably have not delivered any speeches at this Congress. Stalin evidently had plans to finish off the old members of the Politburo. He often stated that Politburo members should be replaced by new ones. His proposal after the Nineteenth Congress concerning the election of 25 persons to the Central Committee Presidium was aimed at the removal of the old Politburo members and the bringing in of less experienced persons so that these would extol him in all sorts of ways. We can assume that this was also a design for the future annihilation of the old Politburo members and in this way a cover for all the shameful acts of Stalin. . . .

Khrushchev's mention of the "bringing in of less experienced persons" refers to the enlargement of the Politburo (or Presidium, as it was now renamed), whereby the old governing group was diluted by the addition of new men, several of whom had been rapidly promoted from obscurity since the war. There was a similar enlargement of the Central Committee Secretariat, membership of which was doubled. These changes certainly reduced the power of the older members who had held office since the pre-war period, but did not in themselves involve their "annihilation." This was a word which Khrushchev did not use lightly; he must have had in mind the long list of one-time members of the highest party organs who had been physically liquidated in Stalin's purges. But when he says that Stalin

at the beginning of 1953 "evidently" had plans to "finish off" the old members of the Politburo of that date, the question arises whether this was for Khrushchev merely an inference from Stalin's general attitude and behavior or whether he received definite information that it was his master's intention.

THE category of "old members of the Politburo" certainly included Khrushchev, who had been a member since 1938. But he does not refer specifically to himself as an intended victim. He refers to Stalin's dislike of Voroshilov and Andreyev and his exclusion of them from meetings of the Politburo; he also, as in the passage quoted above, mentions his attacks on Molotov and Mikoyan and suggests that they were specially in danger. But if charges of disloyalty and treason were to be developed from the accusation of "carelessness," the persons most vulnerable were those who as members of the Secretariat were concerned with personnel promotions and discipline within the party. And the only two of the "old" members of the Politburo who were also members of the Secretariat—apart from Stalin himself—were Malenkov and Khrushchev.

Even if, however, Khrushchev regarded himself merely as included in a group destined for destruction in the impending purge, he might have been expected in his speech against Stalin to have shown how the Doctors' Plot had been fabricated with the aim of implicating this group in charges of treasonable conspiracy. For if Stalin had indeed intended to "annihilate" the older generation of the Politburo, and if the charges against the doctors—which had long since been officially declared false—had so ominously pointed to complicities beyond the accused doctors themselves, it was only logical to explain the Doctors' Plot as a means to the larger purpose—a cruel pump-priming for the new purge. But Khrushchev in his speech does nothing of the sort. His reference to the Doctors' Plot is in a different part of his speech from his allegation of Stalin's intention to purge the Politburo and is unconnected with it. Moreover, he

represents Stalin, not as the prime mover in the fabrication of the Doctors' Plot, but as the dupe of false testimony. In his account of the episode he says:

Actually there was no "affair" outside the declaration of the woman doctor Timashuk, who was probably influenced or ordered by someone—after all, she was an official collaborator of the organs of state security—to write Stalin a letter in which she declared that doctors were applying supposedly improper methods of medical treatment. Such a letter was sufficient for Stalin to reach an immediate conclusion that there are doctor-plotters in the Soviet Union. He issued orders to arrest a group of eminent Soviet medical specialists. He personally issued advice on the conduct of the investigation and the method of interrogation of the arrested persons. . . . Present at this Congress as a delegate is the former Minister of State Security, Comrade Ignatiev. Stalin told him curtly: If you do not obtain confessions from the doctors, we will shorten you by a head.

Stalin is here portrayed as a man no less gullible than he is brutal, for on the strength of a letter from one obscure individual he orders the arrest of a number of eminent doctors and demands that the head of the secret police compel them to confess. But elsewhere in his speech Khrushchev depicts Stalin as quite a different kind of man. Dealing with the purges of the thirties, he makes it clear—as is confirmed by evidence from other sources—that Stalin himself initiated and directed the whole process for political ends. He rejects the idea that the crimes of the *Yezhovshchina* were simply the work of Yezhov:

Could Yezhov have arrested Kossior, for instance, without the knowledge of Stalin? . . . No, it would be a display of naivety to consider this the work of Yezhov alone. It is clear that these matters were decided by Stalin, and that without his orders and his sanction Yezhov could not have done this.

Here is indeed the Stalin of history rather than the man who is represented as flying off the handle in response to a single false denunciation. If Stalin had thus reacted to every slanderous charge anyone made against anyone else, he would not have lasted long.

Morbidly suspicious as he undoubtedly was, his actions were governed by careful planning and political calculation. He set out to destroy and discredit in the first place those who opposed and thwarted him, but also those who, even though they accepted his leadership, had become too powerful and too well entrenched in high office. He had made himself an autocrat without either traditional legitimacy or theoretical justification from the revolutionary doctrine which he represented—for "collective leadership" was always the theoretical basis of authority in the Soviet party-state—and his technique for maintaining his personal power was continually to raise to high office new men who owed their careers to him alone and not to allow any individual or group to establish an independent position. In this way he had used his office as General Secretary to overthrow the old guard of the party, the colleagues of Lenin and veterans of the October Revolution, and in the Great Purge he had finally liquidated not only them, but many of his own faction who had seemed to him too ambitious or insufficiently subservient.

Those who survived at the top of the party had at that time passed the tests of loyalty which he imposed, but fifteen years later it was inevitable that they should appear to him potentially dangerous; they were too much consolidated as a group, too sure of themselves, and too widely accepted by the party and the people as part of the established order of things instead of as mere creatures of the despot's favor. We have Khrushchev's own word for it that Stalin planned to destroy them, and nothing is more probable. But, if he had had this intention, he would certainly have gone about it in a characteristic manner; a man over seventy may be expected to use methods to which he is accustomed rather than resort to new and untried devices. And the Doctors' Plot of 1953 was not a new device; it had been used before.

AS THE official announcement pointed out, one should not be surprised if doctors murdered their patients, because in 1938 the

doctors Levin and Pletnev had confessed to having thus disposed of Kuibyshev, Menzhinsky and Maxim Gorky. But they had not acted thus of their own accord; they claimed that Yagoda, as chief of the secret police at that time, had threatened to exterminate them and their families if they did not obey him. Thus the alleged crimes of the doctors implicated Yagoda and through him the so-called "Bloc of Rights and Trotskyites" which was charged with having instigated the murders. It does not matter in this context whether the doctors did or did not commit these murders on orders from Yagoda (as the instrument of Stalin); under the pressure to which they were subjected they could equally well have committed the crimes and afterwards confessed to them or confessed to crimes which they had not committed. The important point is that the doctors—non-political professional men—were used to testify against high political personages who were on Stalin's death list. The only difference in 1953 was that the revelation of the Doctors' Plot came in advance of a political purge instead of in the middle of it. Otherwise the procedure runs true to form. The doctors confess to having murdered Zhdanov, who was supposed to have died of a heart attack. Perhaps they did; Zhdanov was too big for his boots in 1948, and his death was followed by a purge of his adherents, certainly on Stalin's orders. But in any case the doctors will confess what they have to confess, and when the case comes to trial, they will implicate people more important than themselves. And whither will the threads of conspiracy be found to lead? Khrushchev has given us the answer: to the Politburo.

WHY then does Khrushchev avoid making any connection between Stalin's intention to annihilate the old members of the Politburo and his instructions to Ignatiev to get confessions from the doctors at all costs? Why does he suggest that Stalin ordered the arrest of the doctors only because he was misled by a woman doctor "who was probably influenced or ordered by someone"

in the organs of state security to make a slanderous accusation? Because in July 1954 Ryumin, Ignatiev's deputy in the Ministry of State Security at the time of the Doctors' Plot, had been shot for having fabricated the case against the doctors. On April 6, 1953, just over a month after Stalin's death, it had been announced that Ignatiev had been removed from his post as Minister of State Security because the Doctors' Plot had been found to be a fabrication, but that he had been misled by Ryumin, who was the real author of the frame-up. Since Ryumin had been executed under the reign of socialist legality inaugurated by Khrushchev and Malenkov, it clearly could not be admitted that Stalin himself had originally planned the Doctors' Plot affair, for in that case, in so far as officials could be held guilty for crimes committed on Stalin's orders, the Minister of State Security Ignatiev, who received instructions directly from the dictator himself, bore a greater responsibility than his deputy, who merely had carried out these instructions when they were passed on to him.

Why then was Ryumin shot, while Ignatiev, despite a demotion, continued a comfortable career in the party bureaucracy—he became First Secretary of the party in Bashkiria, and was nominated as a delegate to the 20th Congress? Khrushchev tries to get over this difficulty by suggesting that the woman Timashuk "was probably influenced or ordered by someone," thereby implying, without actually stating, that the initiative in the whole affair came ultimately from Ryumin, whereas Ignatiev knew nothing about it until he was ordered by Stalin to get the doctors' confessions.

It is impossible to give credence to this version of the origin of the Doctors' Plot, particularly as Khrushchev does not state the supposed prompting of Timashuk by Ryumin as a fact—which he could have done if it had been proved, or even alleged, at Ryumin's trial. Khrushchev's strangely confused account indicates a compromise between his knowledge that Stalin organized the whole affair and the need to suggest

that the executed Ryumin had originated it. If he had not originated it, how was he more guilty than Ignatiev, who was sitting in the hall? Or to put the question differently—and it is a crucial one: why was Ignatiev spared? It was not only his deputy, Ryumin, who had paid with his life under Stalin's successors; his predecessor as Minister of State Security, Abakumov, was also executed in 1954 for having fabricated the "Leningrad affair," in which Voznesensky and Kuznetsov had been put to death.

What then was the basis of Ignatiev's immunity? It is all the more remarkable because Ignatiev was instrumental in 1952 in carrying out a purge of the Georgian Communist party which removed a number of Beria's henchmen from key positions; this purge was reversed at once after Stalin's death, when Beria for a period before his own arrest had full control of the security services, and it would have been natural for him then to take his revenge on Ignatiev. Further, this purge was mentioned by Khrushchev in his speech as one of the counts in his indictment of Stalin's rule, but without any reference to Ignatiev. In the passage immediately preceding, Khrushchev describes how Abakumov and others fabricated the "Leningrad affair" and "received what they deserved" at the hands of Soviet justice after Stalin's death; he then goes on in the same tone of high moral indignation to refer to the purge in Georgia, in which "thousands of innocent people fell victim to wilfulness and lawlessness," without ever reminding his listeners that all this happened after Ignatiev had replaced Abakumov as Minister of State Security. Indeed, he leans over backwards to avoid any mention of Ignatiev's name in this context.

It is a valid inference that Ignatiev must have rendered an important service to the men who took over power in the Soviet Union after Stalin's death, and thereby obtained immunity from the fate which overtook others who did the dirty work of Stalin's dictatorship. But as Ignatiev was precisely the man entrusted by Stalin with the task of preparing the destruction of those

who in the event took power after his death, he can only have rendered such a service to them by informing them of Stalin's intentions. If he did so, it would also explain why Khrushchev was so sure that Stalin meant to annihilate all the old Politburo members and why there was so much venom in his speech against Stalin. After all, Khrushchev owed his successful career to Stalin's favor; he had been appointed by the dictator to one high office after another. It would be too much to expect sentiments of gratitude in such a case, but Khrushchev's manifest hatred for his former patron is hardly explicable simply because he had once been subjected to the humiliation of being compelled to dance the *gopak*. It is only fully intelligible if Khrushchev knew for certain that at the end he was on Stalin's death list, and he can only have known for certain from the man who was Stalin's chosen instrument for the projected purge.

IF IT is asked what motive Ignatiev could have had for double-crossing Stalin, it must be remembered that the instruments of Stalin's terror had hardly a higher expectation of life than the people on whom they preyed. Yagoda had perished as an "enemy of the people"; Yezhov had been liquidated without trial after being blamed for the "excesses" of the Great Purge; now Beria, the most faithful of henchmen, was to be destroyed. As Ignatiev became more and more deeply involved in the murderous work he was set to do and saw a new *Yezhovshchina* approaching, he must have reflected on the fate of his predecessors, and may well have wondered whether life would not be safer for him under those whom he was directed to liquidate than in the service of the terrible old man who seemed to grow ever more ferocious, incalculable, and inhuman. If such thoughts prevailed in his mind, he may at length have decided to disclose Stalin's plans to the two members of the doomed category with whom he was associated in the Central Committee Secretariat—that is to say, Malenkov and Khrushchev.

But such foreknowledge would be of no

help to the intended victims unless something were to be done about it. The trial of the doctors was imminent and that would be the beginning of the end. It could only be stopped if Stalin were suddenly to die. And he did, just in time.

The men whose lives were in danger were at the apex of the party-state bureaucracy, but they had virtually no possibility of organizing an armed coup d'état against Stalin. The Soviet army and people were in the grip of the great Stalin myth, and authority had been cleverly distributed by the dictator between different agencies and chains of command. If Stalin were to be removed, it could only be by a secret and silent means from within the circle of those who were supposed to guard him. There was only one man who disposed of such means, and that was the Minister of State Security, who was responsible for the precautions to insure the autocrat's personal safety. An understanding between Ignatiev and the key men of the Politburo would have given the former an assurance—in so far as there can be any confidence between leaders of such a regime—of his future personal immunity, and would have enabled the latter to devise suitable publicity for the happy event about to take place and make arrangements for the succession.

There was, of course, Poskrebyshv, the head of Stalin's personal secretariat, who was always with him and who could be expected to defend him, since he held no public office and his power depended entirely

on Stalin's survival. It would be necessary to remove Poskrebyshv at the same time. In fact, he disappeared utterly and has never been seen or heard of again.

It is impossible to prove in the present state of our historical knowledge that Stalin did not die a natural death, as the official version claimed that he did. It may have been only a coincidence that Stalin died precisely at the moment when he was about to destroy the men who in the event took over power from him. But it is an extremely improbable coincidence, and it is rendered even less probable by the facts with regard to Ignatiev to which attention has been called. Khrushchev's speech to the 20th Congress did not clear up the mystery, but by revealing how strong a motive Stalin's closest associates had for getting rid of him it greatly strengthened the case for supposing that he was murdered. While, however, giving testimony which a jury might regard as damaging to himself on a charge of complicity in homicide, Khrushchev at the same time piled up evidence to show that the homicide, if such it was, had been justifiable. The text of his speech might have been headed: "Why we would have been right to kill Stalin if we had done so." On the supposition that he was addressing an audience a part of which at least suspected that he (and others) *had* done so, we have an adequate motive for the amazing performance by which the myth of the superhuman Stalin was suddenly demolished. No other hypothesis can equally well explain it.